

IN the seven years since the F.A. Trophy competition was formed, no team from the South has ever won the final at Wembley. And if Wycombe Wanderers are to continue towards that goal tomorrow (Saturday), they must overcome Runcorn in the second round for what will be one of their toughest games of the season.

Scarborough (twice), Macclesfield, Telford United, Stafford Rangers, Matlock and Morecambe are the past winners of the competition — all are from the North of England.

The reason for the Northern domination of the Trophy has been put down to their competitiveness and hard graft. Those are the commodities the Blues must overcome tomorrow if they are to go into Monday's third round draw.

OPTIMISTIC

There's no doubt the task facing them tomorrow is extremely difficult. Runcorn are full of experience in this competition, having reached the semi-final stages last season. They held Stafford Rangers (who lost 3-2 after extra time to Scarborough in the final) 0-0 away but lost the second leg 1-0 at home.

It was quite a season for Runcorn all round. They reached the final of the Cheshire Senior Cup for the third successive year and also took the Northern Premier League championship — one of the top prizes outside the Football League.

But despite beating F.A. Cup heroes Northwich Victoria 3-1 away from home, Runcorn have so far failed to repeat last year's success. They lie eighth in the table to date, averaging a point a game.

Wanderers manager Ted Powell, who saw Runcorn beat Altrincham 3-2 in the Cheshire Senior Cup a fortnight ago, is fully aware of the size of the task facing his players. And he is optimistic.

"I expect them to come at us from the start but if we can contain that early pressure we must be in with a chance. Northern sides tend to run and bustle more up front and it is Runcorn's front three that present the biggest danger."

Ted is convinced his side is

more skilful than Runcorn but their styles of play are different. "They play longer balls and have more aggression than most Isthmian League clubs," he says.

"We must apply ourselves and be just as determined. We have a few Northerners in our squad who know the way these teams play."

Apart from one or two long serving players, most of the Runcorn team was signed by manager Stan Storton when he joined the club four and a half seasons ago. He is the brother of Trevor Storton who is now playing for Chester.

Looking through the Runcorn team, goalkeeper Mal Rawlinson has been at the club for three seasons and the back four looks to be full of experience. They are led by Peter Duff who has given them seven years service. This former Manchester City amateur recently received £500 from a testimonial game in his honour.

Former Northwich Victoria player Malcolm Bailey partners Duff in defence while the full backs are Tony Murphy and Tim Rutter. The latter is a youngster and Runcorn will have to obtain permission from his college team for him to play tomorrow.

Runcorn are skippered by Alan King who is an ex-Tranmere player.

DANGEROUS

It is up front that Runcorn appear to be most dangerous with two free scoring forwards. Barry Whitbread, a schoolteacher, signed from Lancaster Town and is right on form at the moment. He hit four of Runcorn's goals in their 6-2 victory over South Liverpool in the first round of the Trophy and is definitely a man to watch.

His partner in the front line is Trevor Finnegan who was signed a season ago from New Brighton where he scored over 50 goals in a season. Last year he had 41 to his credit, Runcorn's top marksman and second top goalscorer in the Northern Premier League.

Former Oldham player Barry Howard, 29, is likely to partner these two up front.

It was the Finnegan-Whitbread combination that earned a point for Runcorn last

week at Great Harwood. They scored the two goals between them.

Runcorn have had more than their share of disciplinary problems this season and no fewer than five of their players have been sent off. Derek Baker, Duff, Wilson, Telford and Spencer have all received their marching orders for various reasons.

This suggests that tomorrow's tie could be physical. Ted Powell is prepared for such happenings, however. He says: "A lot will depend on the referee. They are a physical side and their record leaves a lot to be desired. But I have told the players what they might have to contend with."

Both sides will be without one regular player — both struggling with the same injury. Mick Holifield and Phil Wilson have damaged knee ligaments and both are rated as very doubtful to start the game. Wilson's place will probably go to Spencer.

Wycombe are likely to bring in Gavin Fraser and keep Peter Cruse up front. Cruse has looked a much happier player in the front line while, despite light build, Fraser's vision and speed would be an asset to midfield.

The end to end slope at Runcorn's Canal Street ground is unlikely to worry the Blues who are used to such matters! The ground, in fact, is almost surrounded by water as it is situated between the Bridge Water and Manchester Ship Canals.

Tomorrow's game will be as much a test of Wycombe's character than anything else. If they can produce the football they are capable of, there seems no reason why they cannot come back with at least a draw, despite Runcorn's renowned record over the last three years.

S.E.

Scores twice

TWO goals by Martyn Cleal gave Great Kingshill a 4-3 victory over Stone United Reserves in the Wycombe League Division I on Saturday. The winners' other goals came from Hughie Thomas and Paul Ernest.